

## **Epiphany 1C**

### **Luke 3:15-22**

I sometimes wonder whether baptism by dunking rather than baptism by sprinkling isn't the way to go. John the Baptizer was a dunker; even Jesus was dunked. Throughout the stories in the Acts of the Apostles, baptisms were done by dunking. The early church dunked.

I haven't done the research to discover when we changed to sprinkling. Sprinkle baptisms are certainly more controllable and less messy than dunking. I wonder though if sprinkling has subconsciously lessened the importance of baptism for us, whether we are the baptizees or godparents or observers.

Because I wonder if total immersion may be a better way does not mean that I've changed my mind about infant and adult baptisms. I still believe that we are called to baptize infants and children. This practice has been around since about the second century and has worked fine for the liturgical churches and other churches throughout our Christian history.

But a total dunking visibly says to us that we are washed of our sinful nature and given a wholly new life in Jesus Christ. I think it symbolizes a much deeper and soul touching ritual that can have a different meaning and a different psychological and spiritual effect on us as observers – a different understanding of how we are affected by becoming a child and lifetime follower of Jesus Christ.

There is also a trust factor involved with immersion – a trust that once we go under we will indeed be brought back up – not only spiritually but physically. Not under our own power but with the help of others. Although we go under into this foreign environment that makes it impossible for us to breathe and in which we feel we might even die, we are brought back up into the light and the breath of life.

When I was in seminary, we would start to become aware of pregnant women in the community in late spring. We were getting ready for the great Vigil of Easter the following year and we needed an infant for the baptism. There were adult baptisms as well but for the infants we did total immersion. We owned a special pounded copper baptismal font that was about three feet in diameter and about four feet deep. Perfect for an infant immersion. The adults, of course, were sprinkled.

One year there were no infants in the community, so we didn't have a dunking the night of the Vigil. Shortly thereafter, however, the Dean of Students gave birth and by the time Easter rolled around the following year, we had what might be described as either a good sized infant or a small toddler.

The community knew that Madeline would be our baptizee but she didn't know it. At first she was too young to comprehend something special would happen but when she was about a year old and her mother was getting her ready for the Vigil service, she knew she was going to play a special part. What she didn't know was that all of her clothes would be removed and that she would be handed over to the Dean, who would dunk her three times.

Once the clothes were being removed, she was starting to not like what was happening. When she was handed over to Uncle Bill, she started to get an idea of where this was going. As the Dean began to lower her into the water, her feet and legs started moving as if she were riding a bike – very fast. Her legs were going when she was lowered into the water and when she was raised up. All three times. And she didn't just cry; she screamed and fought it the whole way. Those around the font were soaked. Finally, Maddy was handed back to her mother, who wrapped her in a towel and took her out into the hallway to dry her off and put her clothes back on her body. Word came back through the congregation that she refused to come back into the church. But her mother talked her into it and she talked her into taking her first communion. So while she was in her mother's arms at the altar rail, she received a little bit of bread dipped in wine.

Maddy was truly washed in the Holy Water of baptism. And as scary as the three trips up and down might have been, she was always held by strong arms, supported by the community, and protected. Even though she might not have felt it then, she was safe. And the community was deeply affected, both physically and spiritually.

The adults at that Vigil put their heads over the same font and the dean poured three sea shells of water on their heads and then wiped the water off before sealing them with the Holy Spirit. Very neat, dry, controlled, and in good order. Not the mess of Maddy's baptism. And not the emotional and spiritual involvement of the congregation of Maddy's baptism. Certainly joy at their baptisms, but there just wasn't the physical and emotional involvement that went along with Maddy's.

Madeline's whole body and soul were literally baptized into the life of Christ, into the life of a Christian, into the life of the Christian community. Being immersed three times reminded many of us what our baptism actually signified. Certainly a washing away of our sins. But also a visible sign that we were being initiated into a life that would be messy, that would sometimes feel like we were under water and couldn't get out – when we felt like we couldn't even breathe. But we were reminded that even as we went through those times when we felt we were drowning by the situations of our lives, we were being held by the arms of God – of Jesus – of the Holy Spirit. There was a way out of the water and into the life-giving light and oxygen if we allowed ourselves to be brought out by our Creator. We would not drown if we let God support us – spiritually and physically through those around us and through our own conversations with God.

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, it was a river of significant size and depth. John held him and dunked him under the water, as he had all those who had been baptized prior to Jesus. Jesus came out and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. He was baptized in water and the Spirit.

We're surrounded by a vast body of water in which we can baptize. Yet we continue to baptize with a small bowl and a silver sea shell – I suppose because we've always done it that way in the Episcopal Church of recent times. It's a really nice and neat and ordered and sometimes even fun ritual. But how much does it actually affect our understanding of our own baptisms and does it renew our hope in the love and support of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in our lives? Or do we not even think about our own baptisms?

I wonder how we as observers might respond to full immersion baptisms – if they might change our perceptions of our own baptisms and begin to bring to us a different understanding – a different feeling – perhaps even a joy about our life in Christ. Would we feel more the comfort and security of God's presence when we're moving through times when we feel like we're under water? Would we know the hope that will take us to life again through the deaths of relationships, of loved ones, of jobs, of seemingly uncontrollable and life-changing situations? Would the witness of a full-immersion baptism start us thinking about changing our lives – about going home by another way, as we talked about the Magi doing last week? Will we allow these baptisms to open us to a conversion experience that re-assures us of the hope offered through our discipleship and the never-ending love of God?

Baptismal reminders are just really important. Sometimes we feel that God is no longer with us or that God won't do anything to help us out of a situation. Or we stop talking to God – we stop praying – we turn away from God – even though we know that God is present with us. An out-of-the-bowl baptism – a full immersion baptism – can remind us that we too are baptized in water and the Spirit and that we too will always come up into light and life if we let God hold us through the difficult times.

That's not such a bad deal.

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